

# IMPLEMENTING 15 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR HIGH-QUALITY PRE-K: Florida

Florida’s Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Education Program was created as a result of the 2002 state constitutional amendment requiring prekindergarten access for all of Florida’s 4-year-olds. Age-eligible children are enrolled in either a 300-hour summer program, which every school district is mandated to offer, or a school-year program totaling 540 instructional hours. Information about the summer program is included in the narrative, however, this scan only rates the school-year program.

### Essential Elements

Fifteen Essential Elements clustered in three categories—Enabling Environment, Support for Educators and Young Learners, and High-Quality Instruction—have been identified among exemplary pre-K programs (Minervino, 2014). Note that practice in the field may vary so as to be either better or worse than might be expected based on specific policy or guidance. Consistency or quality of practice across large-scale programs is more difficult to assess than policy.

Enabling Environment		Rigorous, Articulated Early Learning Policies								Strong Program Practices				
Political Will	Strong Leaders	BA + comp	Class size	Two Adults	Hours/Dosage	EL Standards	Effective Curriculum	Special Ed	DLL support	HQ Teaching	PD	Child Assessments	Data Driven	Integrated System
–	–	–	●	●	–	●	–	–	–	ND	–	○	○	–

Key: ● Fully Met    ○ Partially Met    – Not Met    ND Not determined

**Political will.** Gov. Rick Scott (R) is currently in his second and final term. In 2016-2017, state spending on pre-K decreased slightly, to \$397 million. Per child state spending was \$2,282, ranking 42<sup>nd</sup> out of 43 states, D.C. and Guam that operate pre-K programs. Governor Scott’s 2017-2018 Fighting for Florida’s Future budget recommended a \$406.5 million budget for VPK which would increase the base student allocation of \$50 per child.

The Children's Movement of Florida evolved from the 2008 reauthorization campaign for The Children’s Trust in Miami-Dade County. The reauthorization campaign was led by David Lawrence Jr., a journalist and former publisher of The Miami Herald. In 2015, Early Learning Florida, a public-private partnership led by Donald Pemberton, director of the University of Florida’s Lastinger Center for Learning, was rolled out. It’s funded with \$3 million from philanthropic foundations and \$2 million from the Legislature. The online learning system aims to help early childhood professionals gain the knowledge and skills needed to provide quality care and education to children newborn to age 5.

**Compelling vision and strong leadership.** Florida’s Office of Early Learning (OEL) was established as an independent agency administratively linked to the DOE. OEL governs three programs, VPK, Child Care Resource and Referral, and the School Readiness Program. The School Readiness Program started in



1999, expanded in 2001 by incorporating two other state programs—the Prekindergarten Early Intervention Program, which focused on young children’s health, and the State Migrant Prekindergarten Program, which served 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents are migratory agricultural or fishing industry laborers. The program offers financial assistance for child care to qualified parents and is not reviewed in this scan.

While the state provides overall governance of VPK, its administration and delivery of services is done through 30 regional early learning coalitions (coalitions) located throughout the state. The coalitions are nonprofit organizations with governing boards comprised of members of the local community and are monitored annually by OEL.

**Education and compensation.** Teachers in the school-year VPK program are required to have, at minimum, a Child Development Associate (CDA) degree or equivalent credential. Teachers in the summer program are required to have a bachelor’s degree. There are no salary parity policies for VPK teachers.

**Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom.** During the school year, the maximum class size is 20 children with an adult-to-child ratio of 1:10. During the summer, the maximum class size is 12, with a ratio of 1:12.

**Learning time.** The minimum operating hours for the school year program are 540 hours (most programs operate 3 hours per day, 5 days per week) and 300 hours for the summer program (most programs operate 8 hours per day, 5 days per week). Providers are allowed to determine their individual calendars in order to meet those requirements.

**Age-appropriate learning standards.** Florida adopted the Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards (FL ELDS) in fall 2017. The standards and benchmarks reflect the knowledge and skills that a child on a developmental progression should know and be able to do at the end of an age-related timeframe and are aligned. OEL will begin providing online, instructor-led, train-the-trainer professional development opportunities for using the FL ELDS in summer 2018. Once the trainings are available, new VPK teachers, providers on probation, and new directors will be required to attend one of the training courses.

**System that ensures effective curriculum.** Florida only requires programs to select from an approved list of 16 curricula if the program is on probation due to its kindergarten readiness rates falling below the minimal acceptable rate. For those not on probation, VPK programs are expected to select any curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, designed to prepare a student for early literacy, enhance age-appropriate student progress in attaining state-adopted performance standards, and prepare students to be ready for kindergarten based on the statewide kindergarten screening.

**Support for students with special needs.** VPK Specialized Instructional Services allows parents of VPK-age children to choose additional therapies in line with the child’s IEP in lieu of attending a traditional VPK classroom. The number of children who are enrolled in VPK who received special education services is not reported.

**Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL).** The Florida Department of Education has the authority to grant Good Cause Exemptions (waivers) from performance requirements for specific populations, which may include children with disabilities and English language learners. To be eligible for a Good Cause Exemption, the provider must demonstrate learning gains, adherence to an improvement plan, and high health and safety standards.

**High quality teaching.** CLASS or ECERS observations were not able to be reviewed, nor are they required by OEL.

**Professional development.** In 2017-2018, the PD requirements increased to 24 clock hours per year for Directors, Teachers, and Assistants; and 30 hours in 2018-2019. VPK teachers are not required to have written, annual, individualized PD plans. There is no state-level system for coaching and mentoring, so it is difficult to determine to what extent, if any, this occurs in local programs.

**Child Assessments.** Each VPK program is required to use the VPK Assessment that looks at specific early literacy and math skills which are predictive of children's future educational success. VPK providers are required to administer the VPK Assessment for pre- and post- assessment and submit the results on the VPK Assessment Online Reporting System. Though not required, providers are encouraged to administer the assessment mid-year to inform both individual and group instruction. Assessors must complete instructor-led training or online training; or view the VPK Assessment Instructional DVD included in each VPK Assessment kit and document the date completed.

**Data-driven decision-making.** Florida's VPK program is reviewed annually as part of the legislative appropriation process using the results of the FVP Assessment, which includes the previously described pre-K assessment. In addition, the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) is administered annually to all kindergarteners in public schools and all available to kindergarteners attending nonpublic schools. DOE is required by statute to calculate a kindergarten readiness rate every year for each private or public school VPK Provider for either the school-year or summer program. A readiness rate is set by the State Board of Education (Board). A provider is placed on probation if its readiness rate is at or below the minimum set by the Board. While on probation, the program cannot begin instruction for a new VPK class or program and will not receive funding for VPK until an improvement plan has been submitted and approved.

There is no requirement that each provider receive a site visit at least once during a specified period. Rather, site visits are determined by random sample except where follow-up is needed due to technical assistance or corrective action plan follow-up. Each early learning coalition is responsible for the onsite monitoring of VPK providers and for monthly attendance records reviews. The coalitions are required to maintain a single point of entry database of the students enrolled in VPK.

Florida's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability has conducted several studies on VPK. The most recent one in 2012 reviewed elements of the program and found that children taught by teachers with a BA or higher performed slightly better on kindergarten readiness assessments than children taught by teachers with a CDA. VPK School-Year Program participants performed better on kindergarten readiness assessments than those in the VPK Summer Program. Children in three-hour or six-hour VPK programs performed about the same on these assessments.



Kindergarten readiness rates were about the same for public and private providers, while children from faith-based VPK settings performed better on readiness assessments than children from other types of VPK providers.

**Integrated System.** There are some elements of the system that are aligned, including the Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards and the use of a common child assessment. However, most of the essential elements are determined at the local level, including curriculum selection, incorporating coaching into the PD system, and the frequency and structure of classroom assessments.